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The gift aisles are alive with the sight of music

With only eight shopping days left before Christmas, you might find yourself doing some last-minute scrambling for the music fanatic in your family or circle of friends. To ease the pain of staring blankly at the music DVDs in store displays, here's the latest batch of reviews by Gazette music writers to help you figure out what's a no-brainer and what might fall into it's-the-thought-that-counts oblivion. We expect there's something for just about every taste here. The ratings are out of five stars.

BERNARD PERUSSE

U2

Vertigo 2005 // U2 Live from Chicago
Interscope

★★★ If you're one of the many disappointed fans who didn't manage to get a ticket for the Vertigo tour's recent Montreal stop, here's a reasonable facsimile that might lack the immediacy, but offers better sound in the comfort of home. If you did catch the show that rocked the Bell Centre a few weeks ago, a similar set list – from two May shows at Chicago's United Centre – will help you relive memories. Disc 1 is the intermittently-incendiary concert, while a disposable second disc features a half-hour tour documentary that's enjoyable enough – once – along with redundant infrared footage of a few songs from the main event, plus a throwaway video of Sometimes You Can't Make It on Your Own.

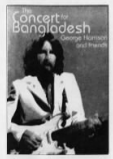
BERNARD PERUSSE

Green Day

Bullet in a Bible
Reprise/WEA

★★★½ "This is the biggest gig, pretty much in the history of punk rock," Billie Joe Armstrong is facing down the second night for 65,000 at England's Milton Keynes. We will be sure of this because of how many times Armstrong yells "England!" during the set. One of the more interesting recent rock tricks was the transformation of this trio of precise, tuneful bubblegunkers into statesmen. Now the makers of important albums on state of America, they contextualize with a visit to the Imperial War Museum to find an actual bullet in bible. It is as heavy-handed as the band's arena-iconic image of black shirt-red tie. All this choking on the self-importance of this immoral moment in the great saga of Green Day is a shame, detracting as it does from a good moment in the story of Green Day.

MARK LEPAGE



George Harrison and Friends

The Concert for Bangladesh
Rhino

★★★★★ Important enough to be released to theatres in the pre-home-video days, this superb account of rock's first serious attempt to act globally still feels like a huge event. Part of the joy in watching this lovingly restored and remixed version of the 1971 show lies in realizing just how much energy and passion was on the stage, courtesy of Harrison and an all-star lineup. And with Bob Dylan almost never leaving the road these days, it's easy to forget the excitement that surrounded his one-shot appearance. A second disc of extras features a terrific documentary, mini-features and three previously unseen performances – including a sweet Harrison-Dylan duet of If Not for You, which was inexplicably cut from the film.

BERNARD PERUSSE

Michael Bublé

Caught in the Act
143/Reprise

★★★½ The crooner's August show at L.A.'s Wilshern Theatre will seem familiar to those who caught his concert at Place des Arts a month or so earlier. While this performance has been aired as a PBS special, here's your chance to watch it on demand – complete with a strangely awkward cameo appearance by Josh Groban. With only two bona fide studio albums under his belt, Bublé seems to be recycling the same songs a little too often, but this 90-minute concert and 20-minute documentary show he's still having a great time with his reliable repertoire of swinging standards and upbeat pop tunes. As a result, it's impossible not to enjoy the ride with him. Comes as a package with an eight-song CD.

BERNARD PERUSSE

k-os

¿Publicity Stunt?
EMI

★★★★ Follow the twists and turns of the k-os maze as the Toronto rapper leaves you to your own devices to find all the treats scattered throughout this interactive DVD. Mixing live footage, great videos, interviews, skits, freestyle raps, a visit to his hometown of Whitby and a 15-minute compilation of breakdancing highlights, this shows the many creative facets of one of the most original voices in Canadian hip-hop. His Joyful Rebellion album was a musically adventurous, Juno-winning breakthrough. This is the fun-filled companion guide.

TCHA DUNLEVY

Peter Gabriel

Still Growing Up: Live & Unwrapped
Real World/Warner

★★½ Everything's relative. Considering the conceptual rhetorics that dominated most of the touring for 2002's Up album, you have to raise an eyebrow when reading the cover's claims of "smaller and more intimate" concerts being documented on this two-DVD set. The footage – from a 2004 European tour – was clearly shot in neighbourhood enormodomes, although Gabriel left the upside-down shoes and giant hamster ball at home, or at least off camera. The cinematography is superb, and there's no faulting Gabriel and his band on the performance front. Still, the Unwrapped component is superfluous, consisting of far too much recycled footage from Disc 1 spliced with occasional interview clips and artfully filmed shots of Gabriel's head. It's a 20-minute bonus feature masquerading as a 75-minute behind-the-scenes documentary.

JORDAN ZIVITZ

Ryan Cabrera

Live at the Wiltern
Atlantic/WEA

★★½ Pity the poor heartthrob. Ryan Cabrera finds himself trapped between his ambitions and his venal desires. An eloquent teen idol with songwriterly passions, he's also the tousle-boy whose screaming fans bring him cookies. Is there credibility after the Big Crush? The thinking-babysitter's sex symbol is a little uncomfortable with it all, but still indulges himself. The best moment (aside from She) comes when Cabrera tries to explain Paul Simon to his audience ... who watch his cover of You Can Call Me Al like bunnies watching a card trick.

MARK LEPAGE

Frank Zappa

The Dub Room Special!
Eagle Vision

★★★★ Zappaphiles will sport goofy grins for weeks after seeing generous footage of the rock iconoclast's beloved 1974 band, which included George Duke, Napoleon Murphy Brock and the magnificent Ruth Underwood. Zappa's own final edit of this 90-minute special, conceived for television in 1982, also offers performances from his 1981 ensemble, featuring Steve Vai, and some scary clay animation by Bruce Bickford. A brief bonus documentary on the hit Valley Girl and a discography add little to the DVD, which you will want to keep on repeat for live versions of such surreal gems as Cosmik Debris and Montana. As always with Zappa, the cruder material – mostly performed by the later edition of the band – is unfortunate, but there's enough musical excitement here to overshadow some cringeworthy lyrics.

BERNARD PERUSSE

Rush

R30: 30th Anniversary Tour
Anthem/Universal

★★★★ The host city for this two-hour concert film is Frank's turf, but if you were at the Bell Centre on Aug. 21, 2004, consider it your souvenir. Since spontaneity isn't among Rush's many virtues, everything here will be familiar. Those who were frustrated at the intrusive crowd noise on 2003's Rush in Rio DVD will delight at the cleaner audio, and the kitschy musicianship and cinematography are spot-on. Still, the real treat is the second disc, featuring a career-spanning archive of interviews and performance clips. Even more would have been appreciated – surely the vaults are packed with rare footage – but they've got to save something for the 40th anniversary. Shell out for the deluxe edition, which includes a two-CD soundtrack of the Frankfurt program.

JORDAN ZIVITZ

Björk

Medúlla Videos
Atlantic/Warner

★★★½ Five fantasy-filled, artistically extravagant videos from the Icelandic alt-pop siren's vocal-centric Medúlla album. She sings among the jellyfish in the beautifully animated Oceanic, flutters about in a bell-covered dress in Who Is It; hits the local pub after fighting with her cat-lover in the hilariously exuberant, Spike Jonze-directed Triumph of a Heart; and wears an indescribable burlap sack costume, and rolls in the hay with a slime-covered zombie on Where Is the Line. Includes an entertaining segment on the making of Triumph of a Heart. Only complaint: at 42 minutes, it's a little short.

TCHA DUNLEVY

Various Artists

Live 8 at Eden: Africa Calling
Rhino

★★★½ While rock fans were obsessing over the Pink Floyd reunion, some of the most interesting sounds at the July 2 Live 8 concerts were coming from the lower profile Eden Project stage in Cornwall. This double-disc set captures two hours and 40 minutes of highlights from the festival's African-music component and adds a solid 30-minute documentary. Some acts, like Somalia's Maryam Mursal and arts collective Siyaya from Zimbabwe are a tad minimalist for repeated viewing, but the magnetic fado wailer Marizia, a down-right rocking Youssou N'Dour, an infectious soukous celebration by Kanda Bongo Man and a show-closing group number starring beat merchants Daara J from Senegal remind us what the global musical event was all about in the first place.

BERNARD PERUSSE

Kylie Minogue

Showgirl
Parlophone/Capitol/EMI

★★★★ You better believe she takes the title seriously. Vegas is the conceptual starting point as Australia's international dance-pop queen performs her two-hour Greatest Hits tour at London's Earl's Court Arena. It's a grandiose, expensive, wardrobe-ravaging affair, the likes of which you won't get to see on a Montreal stage anytime soon. The word extravaganza comes to mind. And it sticks. To hammer the point home, she even sings Somewhere Over the Rainbow. But after the non-stop entertainment barrage – phew – you may find yourself reaching for Jack Johnson to bring you back down to earth.

TCHA DUNLEVY

Jack Johnson

A Weekend at the Greek
Brushfire/Universal

★★★½ A generous, double-disc package featuring a concert at Berkeley's Greek Theatre (and many behind-the-scenes interludes) on the first disc, and Live In Japan, a document of Johnson's 2004 Japanese tour on Disc 2. There's lots here for fans of the acoustic guitar-toting, velvet-voiced surfer – interviews about his music, chats with bandmembers and lots and lots of songs. Johnson comes across every bit as laid-back and likable as he sounds in his music. No double-mirrors, sliding doors or industry shenanigans – this is honest, tender-hearted musical simplicity at work.

TCHA DUNLEVY

Judas Priest

Rising in the East
Rhino

★★★ One long ago Boxing Day, I recall waiting in line outside Sam the Record Man while the two metalheads were discussing their impending purchases. One was buying Unleashed in the East, because Priest "has so great live in Japan. "Japan's in the East!" asked the other. Still is, dude. The Priest return to the scene to cap their reunion tour with a shot-on-the-run DVD. There is a certain lumbering quality to the guitars, which doesn't necessarily hurt, any more than Hadfield's unintentionally creepy Don Cherry-as-aging-wiccan act. Plenty of costume changes for this heavy metal Cher, but no Heading Out to the Highway. Good to see some girls in the front row, I think.

MARK LEPAGE

Queens of the Stone Age

Over the Years and Through the Woods
Interscope/Universal

★★★★ So close to sliding into the '70s, the cowbell and smoke machine never far away, QOTSA are also mercifully erratic. When Josh Homme is on, his brute sexiness is too ambitious for metal and he lapses into a kind of post-stoner greatness. The sound is heavy but the heart is undeniably alt – with its implied artistic distance. Or as Homme said, "Rock should be heavy enough for the boys and sweet enough for the girls." It is here, when Homme finally makes it to London after five previous attempts (foiled by illness, etc). Theatrical snippets and arty visuals lend a rockvid feel to the show. Aside from his downtuned guitar and I Never Came, the show is memorable for Homme's legendary dis of a jerk pelting him with missiles. "This guy," he tells the crowd, "is a total c--smoker."

MARK LEPAGE

Blackmore's Night

Castles & Dreams
SPV

★★★★ This double-disc by the Renaissance-obsessed folk-rockers weighs in at almost four hours – way too much for anyone who is less than a fanatic. If you love the medieval minstrels, however, this generous anthology – a full concert with a large assortment of videos, documentaries, television appearances and alternate performances – will put you over the moon. An outstanding two-hour live performance at a German castle takes up most of the first disc, and it's probably the most interesting thing about the collection. Still, the story of how guitarist Ritchie Blackmore morphed from a heavy-metal hero to an unplugged troubadour – abetted by his wife, Candice Night, the group's vocalist – is one of rock's stranger, and more intriguing, yarns.

BERNARD PERUSSE

Duke Ellington

Love You Madly/A Concert of Sacred Music at Grace Cathedral
Eagle Eye Media

★★★★★ Two-hour-long documentaries from 1965, produced by Ralph J. Gleason for NET public television, allow us a privileged glimpse of the Duke and his music. Love You Madly gives us the jazz genius performing with his band at San Francisco's Basin Street West and talking about the creative process in his dressing room and hotel and on the road. The Grace Cathedral concert – with the bandleader, his 15-piece orchestra and special guests – is a stunning suite of divinely-inspired Ellingtonia that has lost none of its power over the decades. While the video on both is vintage black-and-white and the audio primitive, the excitement and historical weight make the DVD a must-have.

BERNARD PERUSSE

Brian Eno

14 Video Paintings
(All Saints/Hannibal/Ryko)

★★★½ The least you can say about Eno's two groundbreaking ambient videos is they bear out his edict: "I see TV as a picture medium rather than a narrative medium." The audio on Seven Video Paintings of Christine Alicino is akin to Tubular Bells on quaaludes, and yet ... zoned out in an airport waiting room (which they were designed for) or a living room couch, it can lull you (that's why Eno spells relief). The 42-minute psychedelic transformation of Alicino floating nude in the water was filmed in San Francisco in 1984, treated and assembled at Sony in Tokyo, and recorded and produced with Daniel Lanois in Hamilton. There's seven more episodes in Mistaken Memories of Mediaeval Manhattan ... well, you get the picture.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Pixies

Pixies Sell Out: 2004 Reunion Tour
Rhino/Warner

★★★★ While the Pixies' resurrection came as a complete shock, a lucrative document of said resurrection is completely predictable. As is its high quality – here was a reunion that achieved the near-impossible by living up to expectations for a band that came to be mythologized during its 12-year absence. With 28 songs in the main feature (a concert from Bellet, France) augmented by 15 bonus tracks filmed hither and thither during the tour, Pixies Sell Out represents a hefty slab of the band's slender discography, performed with a balance of stoicism and feral intensity. The only significant disappointment is the interview segment: Instead of unenlightening chats with the tour and production managers, why didn't the band members speak up on their own behalf?

JORDAN ZIVITZ

Marianne Faithfull

Live in Hollywood
(Eagle Vision)

★★☆ Celebrating 40 years in the biz as one of pop's most idiosyncratic singers, Faithful is caught last June bearing up with a languid cackle. The mood is defined by the program, starting in the dumps with Trouble in Mind, Falling from Grace and Mystery of Love (PJ Harvey version) and winding up inevitably with a tired As Tears Go By, Sister Morphine and Broken English. She's still the Hatlow blond, bearing the well-documented blowsy bust that once drove Sir Mick into a monkey rum. There's a strange disconnect between her slick jazz-funk band and the general crawl of the performance; the lack of any real stagecraft and the oft-rote delivery hurts.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Rick James

Super Freak Live 1982
(Eagle Vision)

★½ Rick James died of "existing conditions" in August 2004: at his peak, he was sweatier and balsier than Prince, but barely as skilled. This performance is from his first trip to Europe (Essen, Germany), bringing the message of punk-funk to hungry fans. Surrounded by 15 musicians and singers, swathed in a red sequined pantsuit, then switching to black, the barrel-chested singer is relentless, mechanical, in other words a super-freak – you can practically see the seeds of the stroke he suffered on stage 16 years later. His profanity and word-play, ineffectual by today's standards, can't save the plodding guitar tongues and automaton rhythms. What was that all about? The routine ages poorly.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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